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NICARAGUA/  
FIGHTING

LEHRER: In Nicaragua, there were no reports of fighting today between the government and contra forces. Last week, the government recaptured two towns that had been briefly occupied by the rebels. Charles Krause, on assignment for this program, reports now on the Sandinistas government's battle against the contras.

KRAUSE: The Sandinistas now have more than 50,000 men under arms, the most powerful fighting force in Central America. They've deployed an increasing number of their troops to remote unmarked battlefields near Nicaragua's borders with Honduras and Costa Rica. It's here the contras have infiltrated 6- to 8,000 men, with help from the CIA. The death toll on both sides is mounting. Western military analysts say the contras have become an often deadly irritant but as yet pose no serious threat to Nicaragua's revolutionary government. But the Sandinistas are, to a large extent, trapped. They can not easily defeat the contras because that would require attacking their support facilities in Honduras and Costa Rica, risking a direct confrontation with the United States. The Sandinistas' young, highly motivated army, though, has isolated the U.S.-backed counterrevolutionaries far from Nicaragua's major cities. And today, the contras appear no closer to achieving their military and political aims than they did six months or a year ago. Last week, the Sandinistas scored another major victory when they dislodged a force of about 500 contras from San Juan del Norte. The town which the anti-Sandinista rebels said they would make their provisional capital was virtually destroyed before the fighting ended. All that was left was captured ammunition and evidence of the contras close ties with the United States. While San Juan del Norte was still under siege, another band of contras attack \*Sumubila, a relocation camp built two years ago to house Miskito Indian refugees. The Miskitos are an indigenous tribe with their own heritage and culture. Many of them are sympathetic to the contras because when the Sandinistas first came to power, they failed to respect the Miskitos' language and traditions. But the attack last week at \*Sumubila left many of its 3,000 residents confused and angry. The contras killed seven innocent civilians and kidnapped 40 others, including a doctor.

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KRAUSE: Did they want to go with them? Or did they not want to go with them. OLIVER HUMPHREYS (Town resident): Sir, there was crying. The people then was crying when them took them. They didn't want to go.

KRAUSE: Before the were driven off, the contras destroyed Sumubila's health clinic and malaria control station. They burned an ambulance and destroyed a warehouse filled with fertilizer, seeds and other material the Miskitos need for farming, their only sources of income. Accused by the United States of violating the Miskito Indians' human rights, the Sandinistas viewed the contra attack on Sumubila as a propaganda victory. Defense Minister Humberto Ortega toured the area last weekend. He told us the situation in Central America is becoming more and more dangerous. HUMBERTO ORTEGA (Minister of Defense) (Voice of Translator): We don't totally discard the possibility of a direct U.S. intervention in El Salvador, which would create great tension with Nicaragua and possible military intervention against us. There were no indications the U.S. has stopped its aggression. On the contrary, it's increasing its forces in such a way that each time we defeat the contras the U.S. steps up its involvement.

KRAUSE: The Sandinistas are closely watching whether Congress votes to cut off further aid to the contras. If the aid is cut, the Sandinistas believe they could easily defeat the U.S.-backed rebels. Because of their view, the contras have little popular support inside Nicaragua. But the Sandinistas' principal concern remains the CIA, which has mined their ports, and the growing U.S. military presence in neighboring Honduras. Even if the contras are cut off or defeated, the Sandinistas are convinced the Reagan administration will use other means to try to put an end to their revolution.

MACNEIL: That was a report by Charles Krause, our special correspondent.